

Briege O'Hare – Session 5 Clare Retreat, August 2005 Stella Niagara

The topic I will present now is a vast topic and one that my community and I have reflected upon and discussed a great deal. I am going to use two basic texts, one is the fourth letter of Clare to Agnes and I select it because Clare wrote this letter shortly before she died. We can only assume that someone was the scribe and that the scribe was Leo because after Francis died, he would have done this kind of thing for Clare.

In this letter I would believe that Clare is trying to enter into the very essence of what the Spirit of God has given to Francis and herself in the charism. It is essentially a magnificent theology of Lady Poverty. The other text that I will make some reference to is the Sacrum Commercium, the Holy Agreement as we often call it now.

I want you to notice the structure of how Clare starts out to impart her understanding of this great gift. This letter is one of the most beautiful pieces of literature from this time. You know already that Clare speaks first of her love for Agnes of Prague. This is a marvelous description of that mutual indwelling which is a marvelous gift of God to us if we truly enter into this gift of charism. She uses intimate language – mother, daughter, spouse, and king of all ages. She has a wonderful way of saying how she longs to be in communication with her.

*O mother and daughter, spouse of the King of all Ages, if I have not written to you as often as your soul and mine as well desire and long for, do not wonder or think that the fire of love for you glows less sweetly in the heart of your mother. No, this is the difficulty: the lack of messengers and the obvious dangers of the roads. Now, however, as I write to your love, I rejoice and exult with you in 'the joy of the Spirit' [1 Thess. 1:6], O bride of Christ because since you have totally abandoned the vanities of this world, like another most holy virgin, Saint Agnes, you have been marvelously espoused to 'the spotless Lamb who takes away the sins of the world' [1Pt:19; Jn. 1:29]."*

Clare is beginning to show Agnes again, before she dies, what our charism is as Franciscan women. Notice what she does. She immediately starts to describe the beauty of Christ. This is the first thing she does, because if we don't understand this we don't understand poverty. So Clare has this wonderful poetic way of describing Him. But she begins by saying that we share in this beauty. We too are sharing in the beauty of the second person of the Trinity. We are made in the likeness of the second person of the Trinity, manifest in both men and women, "Happy indeed is she to whom it is given to share in this sacred banquet, to cling with all her heart to Him (and here is her description of the beauty)

*Whose beauty all the heavenly hosts admire unceasingly,  
Whose love inflames (excites) our love,  
Whose contemplation is our refreshment,  
Whose graciousness is our joy,  
Whose gentleness fills us to overflowing,  
Whose remembrance brings a gentle light,  
Whose fragrance will revive the dead,  
Whose glorious vision will be the happiness of all the citizens of the heavenly Jerusalem.  
Inasmuch as this vision is the splendor of eternal glory (Heb.1:3), the brilliance of eternal light and the*

*mirror without blemish (Wisdom 7:26).*

It's what Clare says after this that is important. She says 'gaze upon this mirror,' she's talking about the second person of the Blessed Trinity. 'Gaze upon this mirror, O queen and spouse of Jesus Christ, and continually study your face within it' so that you may see who you truly are. She is saying to Agnes, you are this beautiful image of God. You are the one who shares the likeness of the Divine Second Person of the Trinity, the Word, Jesus; this she says, is who you are.

If we do not grasp this we will not see why she continues to develop her theology in this letter and the way of poverty. Lady Poverty is the divine image that we are. That's Lady Poverty. For us to claim poverty as the essence of our charism as Franciscans is to claim our likeness to God. That's what it is.

You have in the *Sacrum Commercium*, the beginning in which Francis is in search of Lady Poverty, in paragraph 5, listen to the language of it. This document is an allegory, a story, and it was written shortly after the death of Francis. We don't know who the writer was, but we do know that it was an attempt to call the friars especially, to call them back to the true gift of the charism because unfortunately our brothers at that time were beginning to get sidetracked into a whole lot of other false paths, one of them being clericalism and they were beginning to want to establish institutions, places where they could be making an impact on the church and so on. All of these things are illusions for us as Franciscans. So whoever wrote this document was trying to call the brothers back to the true nature of our charism. And sometimes I wonder if Clare had a hand in it, because it was written very shortly after the death of Francis. There are some parallels with some sections of this document with some of her writings. But I'm the only person I've ever heard say that. But I'll demonstrate it to you. But listen to the beginnings of chapter 1,

Francis began to go about in the street and crossings of the city. (That is taken directly from the Song of Songs that I quoted to you the other day.) Relentlessly, like a painstaking explorer diligently searching her whom his heart loved. Now this is a quest that we all have within us. We all have the quest, the longing, the desire within us for that whom our heart loves. And that whom our heart loves, he, she, what, whom our heart loves is our divine nature. It's our likeness to God. We know it's there. We long to re-identify with it and to live from it.

The story goes on, he inquired of the locals and questioned visitors saying, have you seen her whom my heart loves? But what he said was hidden from them as though it were a foreign language. Now this is a very subtle hint about the friars at that time. This had become a foreign language to them, this whole mystical reality of the true nature of our humanity. Not understanding him they said to him, Mister, we do not know what you are saying. Speak to us in our own language and we will give you an answer. So poor old Francis has to move off and inquire of someone else. He decides to look for wise people and he spots two wise old men and he decides to ask them if they can tell him.

"When Blessed Francis reached these men he said to them, 'tell me I beg of you can you tell me where Lady Poverty lives, where she eats, where she rests at midday for I am faint with love for her. And they replied, good brother we have sat here for a time and time and half a time (forever) and we have often seen her pass by for others have sought her, sometimes many accompanied her but often she returned alone and naked adorned with no jewels, honored by no companions, clothed with no garments.'" This is

all attempting to introduce the reader into realizing that the true nature of our humanity has been forgotten by the human race. People are dismissing it.

I want to go into a more modern way of interpreting this because we have to look at this in a language for today. First a reference to paragraph 25 (SC) and then we will try to read into this. When Francis eventually meets Lady Poverty, she then begins to tell them a little about herself and she says 'at one time I was in the paradise of God for Adam and Eve were naked. In fact I was in them and with them in their nakedness in that most splendid paradise, fearing nothing, doubting nothing, and suspecting no evil and I thought I would be with them forever. They were created just, good and wise by the Most High and placed in that most pleasant and peaceful place. I was so happy, rejoicing before them always for having nothing of their own their concern was only for God.

This is a description of our own original state of our humanity. How we do that theologically we're not worried; we are looking at this allegorically. This is a description of the fact that human beings at one time were living from their divine identity, their image of God identity. Lady Poverty is like the image or sign of that. Really, the journey of life for all human beings, Franciscans or not, the journey of life is the journey from what I would call unconscious unity with our divine nature to conscious unity. It's a long process.

The early Fathers of the Church (and I say Fathers deliberately because I haven't any Mothers to quote this morning). I often think Clare was greatly influenced certainly by Gregory of Nyssa because some of her letters are almost exact in repeating some of the things Gregory of Nyssa has said. The early fathers of the Church, especially the early Eastern Orthodox tradition were very focused on this thing of our divine nature. They spoke and wrote a great deal about our journey back to deification – the journey back to who we really are in God, our true identity. Let me quote you a couple examples. Gregory of Nazianzus from one of his dogmatic poems. "The word of God took a lump of newly created earth and formed it with his immortal hands into our shape and imparted life to it because the spirit that God breathed into us, is flesh of the invisible Godhead." I have in me a portion of the Godhead. Gregory of Nyssa says, "Our spiritual dimension which is precisely that we are an image of our Creator is beyond our ability to explain. By this mystery within us we bear the imprint the incomprehensible Godhead." Cyril of Alexandria says, "Participation in the Holy Spirit gives human beings the grace to be shaped as a complete image of the divine nature." Listen to Maximus, the Confessor, who is talking about what will happen to us eventually. I hope I am not too heavy with this, but we won't understand poverty if we don't get this.

Let any one of us take our self as an example because this is going to happen to each of us when we complete our journey. The chances of it happening before death are practically nil. Maximus speaks of us as the deified person and he says that "eventually when we come into our deification, we will remain completely human both in body and soul." This is something stressed so much by the early Fathers. It's the body and the soul that are divine. This is why in the early Church the thing that shocked people was not the fact that we will rise from the dead and that we will be loved forever. There are a lot of people in the Jewish tradition who believe in a form of resurrection, a form of eternal life. But what really shocked the world at that time was the claim of the early Christians that it's our bodies are divine and are going to rise from the dead exactly as Jesus did. In our eternal existence we will still have bodies is what they are saying. We will be deified in both body and soul. Maximus says that this "us," the deified person, becomes wholly God in both body and soul through grace and the divine brightness of the beatifying glory which

permeates the whole person. Listen to his language; it sounds almost heretical but it is wonderful language. "The creature, by deification become God, no longer displays any energy other than the divine." (This is stage #4 of our spiritual growth about which I have spoken before.) This is the awakening to our divine nature. The creature no longer displays any energy other than the divine. So that in everything from now on there is only one energy belonging to God because the whole of God's being proper to love enters into the whole of the being of God's elect." We are all deified, sharing in the life of God but we do not lose our unique identity. That is specific to Christians.

Where is all this taking us in regard to poverty? The problem is, what Ken Wilbur calls the Atman Project. (Atman is a Hindu word for the Spirit.) Wilbur tries to explain this. He says that the spirit, the divine dimension is still present in us. But if we separate from God, the Trinity God, we still have this goal of infinite transcendence, because our spirit is infinite and eternal but we've lost the connection with the Triune God and so what happens is that we fall into ourselves as the divine. This desire for transcendence is always there. Every human being wants to be God. We all have in us the instinct for God, for the Ultimate. But it's in ourselves alone that we see it fulfilled. This is what the separate ego is. It has caused all the divisions in the world, dividing humans from one another, dividing nations from one another. We try to create our own separate little ghettos where we feel we are god. This is the problem.

Jesus comes, this is the reading of Francis and Clare, to bring us back to our true nature. This is why Jesus came, from the sharing of His nature. It is all in Him that we enjoy our divine nature. Basically what Francis and Clare are saying is that when we are born into this world there are three things we learn about life and about ourselves very quickly.

The first thing we learn is that we are very vulnerable. We discover that when we are little children and we feel how hurt we are when our parents are cross with us. We discover that we are very vulnerable. It's a very uncomfortable unpleasant sensation. We try to find a way of surviving in this world in such a way that this vulnerability is not exposed. That is the nakedness of the Garden of Eden before the fall. It now feels unpleasant. So we tend to cover it up. Lady Poverty in *Sacrum Commercium* says that we cover it up with the skins of the dead. The covering up, with the skins of the dead, our vulnerability with the skins of the dead is usually in the form of possessions, with things that make us feel less vulnerable. Possessions, not just material possessions, but achievements of some kind, study degrees, etc., all external things that cover up this inner vulnerable human being.

The second thing we discover about ourselves is that we are very dependent; we are really dependent on other people for life in all sorts of ways. And that is a feeling we don't like either. We like a sense of independence. We cover up our feeling of dependence with the "skins of the dead." The skins of the dead that we use for that are things that make us feel a bit more important so that we don't depend upon them – things that give us a sense of status. We like to be acknowledged because of certain things, little unimportant things, but we get so trapped in it. Status that makes us feel just a little bit above the rest with regard to something. It doesn't really matter what the something is. Those things are the skins of the dead.

The third thing that we discover about life is that life is very precarious. We can't seem to get it under control no matter how hard we try. All sorts of things happen, we get ill or we break a leg, for example, or a loved one just dies and they're gone. We didn't expect it. Life is so precarious; we feel it's so out of

control. We can't get it together no matter how hard we try. So the skins of the dead are what we use to cope with that reality, that nakedness. It gives some kind of power over life, power over people, control over something, over some kind of position. We're attracted to getting higher and higher in some kind of a career, things like that.

This is how the world operates and power is one of the greatest attractions for people in the world. Power over others – it could be in the form of political power, it could be in the form of hypnotic power, like stars, stars of the Oscar award types. A type of humility comes across in wanting to thank people, but there's also "I've made it," this sense of having achieved something that very few others have achieved. It covers up the nakedness but it's the skins of the dead. Jesus comes to teach us how to be naked again and to love it! To enter into the death of our true nature so that we know longer need the skins of the dead. Jesus shows us the way and this is what Clare is explaining in her fourth letter to Agnes.

In response to our vulnerability, dependence, and precariousness of life Clare speaks about Christ as the mirror, the one who reveals back to us our own true nature; she says study your own face and see your own self, your own true being, your divine nature. The edge of the mirror, the first aspect of the mirror of Christ, of your nature, is the poverty of him who was placed in a manger and wrapped in swaddling clothes. Re-own you utter vulnerability. What is more vulnerable than a child in a manger? Clare says, "O marvelous humility, O astonishing poverty, the king of the angels, the Lord of heaven and earth laid in a manger – Clare's language for utterly vulnerable. The point Clare is trying to make is the very part of ourselves we are trying to cover up and escape from is the very aspect of us that is the divine nature. It is the point of connection with our divinity. In the *Sacrum Commercium* Lady Poverty tells Francis there are two places where she can be found. The first one is in the miry bog, a dirty ugly place where you go down and down in the messy place. You need to find your divine nature in that part of yourself. That messy, filthy, dirty part of yourself. That vulnerable, weak, frail, inadequate, messed up human being that you consider yourself to be.

At the very depth of it is this treasure of the divine spark. It's not in the ego status skins of the dead, that's all an illusion. And the only way that we're going to connect with this vulnerability in this miry bog is through contemplation, this is what Clare says, look at the crucified Christ. That's Jesus all messed up. "A worm and no man." Find that in yourself. The messed up human being that you keep pushing away because you think everybody will despise her. That includes the real sins that we have committed in the past because they've all come from the search for our divine nature.

Julian of Norwich is wonderful on this. She almost goes to the point of saying that God gets really excited when we commit sin because He knows it's Him we're looking for. It's love we're searching for. It's the Divine in ourselves we're trying to connect with again. Owning our vulnerability is step one in reclaiming our true nature. That's what Clare is saying; then she says (remember she's talking about the mirror) at the surface of the mirror consider the holy humility, the blessed poverty, the untold labors and burdens that he endured for the redemption of the human race. This is Clare's answer to our not wanting to feel dependent upon others, to our wanting a little bit of status so that we don't feel dependent on others. It is precisely in being utterly humble in our need for others that we find the Divine in ourselves and in others. It is allowing ourselves to need others that we connect with the Divine. It is in the willing to be in the service of one another in love that we connect with the Divine in ourselves. Then Clare goes on to say,

“then in the depths (of this same mirror) contemplate the ineffable love that led him to suffer on the wood of the cross and to die there the most shameful kind of death.”

Clare is saying that the answer to the precariousness of life where we try to have power and control the true way of shedding that skin of the dead (power and control) is this way, the cross. It's surrendering with open arms to whatever providence allows in life. Francis refers to it as obedience. Clare never uses the word obedience. Never! And I suspect that Clare as a woman, living in a patriarchal society the word obedience had too many oppressive connotations. For a man, not so, because it was something of an honor, as for a knight to serve in that way. Francis speaks about the poverty, the humility, and the obedience of Jesus. They are the three ways of stripping off and reclaiming our nakedness of our divine nature. Clare speaks of the poverty, the humility, and the love of Jesus, the loving surrender to whatever Providence allows. We no longer try to control life. We no longer try to feel that we have power over anything. We simply stand naked knowing that we live in the Divine Will.

Just notice the conclusion *Sacrum Commercium* with the conclusion of this fourth letter; I find the parallels very interesting. This is one of the reasons why I think that Clare might have had a hand in this document. Paragraph #64 of *Sacrum Commercium*, Lady Poverty is talking to Francis and the brothers and she says, “You are blessed children by the Lord God who created the heavens and the earth, you who welcome me with such love, (that means that you go out of the divine image of yourself) I imagined I was with you today in the garden of God (she is saying you were back in your nakedness with me, that lovely Divine image you have reclaimed it but this time with consciousness) so I am overjoyed, I am filled with consolation, the Lord is indeed with you and I did not know it. What I wished for I now seek, what I desired I now have for I am joined on earth with those who represent the image of Him to whom I am espoused.” This is poverty, that we have consciously reclaimed our identity with the second person of the Trinity, the Christ nature in us. And she goes on to say in paragraph 66, a little word of encouragement and you find Clare uses similar language. Just hear both. She says, “Do not be put off by the difficulty of the effort nor the amount of work involved (getting to our true being, shedding the skins of the dead) for you will have a grand reward and looking to Jesus, the pioneer, as the one who showed the way by doing this himself, who for the sake of the joy that was set before him, endured the cross, disregarding its shame, hold fast to the confession of your hope without wavering, run with love to the race that is set before you, run with perseverance which is most necessary for you so that when you have done the will of God you may receive what was promised for God has the power to bring to a happy ending by God's grace what you have begun without being able to finish, but God is faithful to God's promises.

Now listen to how Clare concluded her fourth letter after she describes the ways in which we shed the skins of the dead and we stand in vulnerability, in humility and in obedience to whatever life brings trusting in the providence of God, she then says “From this moment on O Queen of our Heavenly King be enflamed more strongly with the fervor of heavenly love as you further contemplate these ineffable delights, eternal riches and honors: (She is talking about realizing our true selves in Jesus) and sigh for them (yearn for this identity of yours) in the great desire and love of your heart may you cry out ‘draw me after you, we will run in the fragrance of your perfumes, O Heavenly Spouse. I will run and not tire until you bring me into the wine cellar and your left hand is under my head and your right hand will embrace me happily and you will kiss me with the happiest kiss of your mouth’” Clare is saying the complete union with the Divine will happen. Jesus Christ, the second person of the Trinity and us we are now one. And so

it goes on; it is incredibly beautiful but there is no more time. THIS is poverty! This is it! This is Lady Poverty!

Let me just finish with a little story I love in Celano about Francis when he was walking, with some of his companions and his doctor, along the road with his companions and a lame man, a doctor, and they see these three women coming toward them. Celano, in introducing this story, says I don't know the meaning of this episode I am about to relate, all I can tell you is that it definitely happened. These three women coming along who are poor. And the thing that amazed them is that they were identical to look at. They were poor women and beautiful and they were approaching. The friars are stunned when they see them because they are identical. But Francis is struck by their poverty and he turns to his friend, the doctor who is the only one carrying money and he says, 'please give me some money that I might give it to these poor women'. So he has the money in his hand, ready to give it to them and they approach and to his amazement they make the most reverent bow before Francis and they say to him, "Greetings, Lady Poverty." Francis is absolutely flabbergasted! He knew that they recognized in him that which he most loved, his identity with the second person of the Trinity. And Francis knew that they understood that the only way into that was through the doorway of poverty, of our vulnerability, of humility and of surrender to Divine Providence. He was utterly stunned and he did not know how to respond. I think he may have tried handing over the money, but I don't know what happened there.

But they passed on and it was a wide, flat plain stretching for miles. He was so stunned that he looked back at them as did the brothers and Celano says that they had disappeared as though they had flown away like the birds of the air. He gives no explanation. But I believe that it parallels with the three men in the Old Testament (Genesis 18) that it was indeed the Poor Christ manifest as the second Person of the Trinity – manifest as three women, three poor women. This is the only way on this earth that we can reclaim our divine identity. This is our charism to take this journey. We're told in the Sacrum Commercium not to lose heart, to continue because there will be a wonderful conclusion which is our ultimate deification. (Song #3 on CD, Francis' words from his letter to the entire Order about Eucharist, we can be one with the second Person of the Trinity. Francis' words, "Let the whole world tremble...The words are set to music in such a way as to recognize that we are invited to enter the depth into the miry bog, into the humility of God.).

#### **Questions:**

1. How would you describe the "beauty of Christ"?
2. How is Lady Poverty manifested in my/our lives?
3. How do I/we reflect Christ "who is the mirror" through which I/we see ourselves?